

RECENTLY when I saw an advertisement in the newspaper for 'Auntie's Pappads' I was reminded with a jolt of Aunt Bhagirathi. When I thought again of the untimely death of her dear son, my intimate friend Kedari, my eyes filled with tears. Whoever could have guessed that such a fate awaited Kedari? It is when we contemplate such happenings that our faith in man's endeavour is weakened and our belief in the invincible power of destiny grows stronger.

When Kedari was lying ill there wasn't a doctor in Madras who was not consulted. Yet none of them could discover the root cause of his illness. They said it was this and they said it was that or they said that some complication had set in, and they all treated him. But Kedari didn't recover. He died leaving us all inconsolable. The course of his illness and his death made the doctors themselves unpopular for a while. 'What is this medical science?' cried the people. 'What kind of doctors are these? All humbug, mere ostentation!'

My writing now may exonerate the doctors. Kedari's illness was not a medical case. How could the doctors have known that the root cause of his illness was mainly psychological and that the deep disturbance in his mind was caused by one of the many diseases that plague our society? Of this even his dear mother and his young wife were unaware. Only I, his most intimate friend, knew that secret. On his death I was so deeply affected that I was unable either to speak or write about it. Now more than a year has passed. Considering it my duty to my beloved friend, I herein reveal the true story of his life.

Yes, it is a sad story. Some of us go to the theatre to enjoy the moving scenes of a tragedy; but we do not like to witness the tragedy of real life which takes place before our very eyes. We close our eyes to it. It is better such people do not read Kedari's story.

Kedari had no memories of his father. When he was three his father had deserted his home and family and gone away. He had fallen under the spell of a stage actress for whom he abandoned his wife and three-year old son. We did not know the details of these incidents for a very long time. It was only when Kedari's marriage was being discussed that his mother told us the whole story.

When Aunt Bhagirathi asked him to go and see a young girl who had been proposed as a possible bride, Kedari said : 'It is enough, Mother, if you see her and take the decision. Even if you ask me to marry a cripple I will do as you wish.'

'Well, what more do you want, Aunty?' I asked her. 'In this wicked age of Kali you cannot come across another son like this. The decision is now wholly yours.'

But Aunt Bhagirathi was determined not to do it that way. 'Kedari must go and see the girl,' she insisted stubbornly. 'Let him come back and tell me to proceed further in the matter. Only then shall I proceed to fix up the marriage.' It was then that I heard her mention Kedari's father.

'In our families so many marriages are arranged without consulting the boy and the girl and this leads to much trouble

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and heartache,' she said reminiscently. 'The whole town blamed Kedari's father when he left us and went away. At that time I too was full of shame and resentment, no doubt. For forty days I was ill in bed. But later when I was able to think dispassionately about it, it occurred to me that perhaps he was not to blame, after all. You see he had not wanted to marry me at all. I learnt he had even said so frankly. But the elders forced him into this marriage. So somehow we clenched our teeth and kept house together for five or six years. Then came that actress-siren. He went away with her.'

When Aunt Bhagirathi had herself opened the subject, I was able to ask a few pertinent questions without seeming inquisitive and thus heard the full story. Kedari's father, Sundaram Iyer, was well-built and handsome. He had a fine voice and could sing well. He was then a clerk in the post office at Tirumangalam. A well-known stage actress called Rangamani had come to that town with her troupe and had staged some plays there. One day the news spread all over town that the actor who was playing in main role had taken seriously ill and that most probably there would not be any performance that evening. Kedari's father had always been stage-struck. He had seen all the well-known plays so often that he knew them by heart. As for the songs, he could render them backwards. So he went to Rangamani and said, 'I can play the hero's part this evening.' He also demonstrated that he could sing the songs. Rangamani was impressed and agreed. The play was staged. Kedari's father acted so well that everyone was amazed. It was a proud moment for Auntie too.

That was how it started. As long as the theatrical company was in Tirumangalam, Kedari's father stayed with them. Soon it became the talk of the town and rumour started that he had resigned from his job, that the siren Rangamani had enslaved him and that she was going to take him away with her. But Aunt Bhagirathi did not believe the scandal. At last the drama company left town. The next day Sundaram Iyer was nowhere to be found.

Later it was known that the theatrical company had gone to Ceylon and that Sundaram Iyer had joined it there.

After that nothing had been heard of him. There had been vague rumours that the troupe was abroad touring Ceylon, Burma, Singapore and Penang. Many years later the troupe was said to have come to Madras also once or twice but by then Aunt Bhagirathi had stopped even thinking of her husband. Now all her hopes were centred on her son Kedari.

When Aunt Bhagirathi's parents learnt that Sundaram Iyer had abandoned her and disappeared, they came to Tirumangalam and took her home with them to the village. They were themselves poor. But as they had no other children they managed on their meagre saving somehow for the next five or six years. Then they came to Tiruchi to put Kedari to school.

I remember their coming. It all seems like yesterday. I was a student in the First Form in a school in Tiruchirapalli and we were living in the Mathrubhootham block of tenements in town. For some days past the house opposite ours had lain vacant. One day I heard that some new tenants were coming to live there and I was eagerly looking forward to their arrival. At last they came, with their old tin boxes, bundles and bags—a grandfather, a grandmother, an aunty and a boy. I remember staring amazed at the boy who was wearing gold bangles on his wrist, his hair plaited, and on his head a cap !

That boy was Kedari. From the very first time I spoke to him, I took an immediate liking to him. Having always lived in a village, everything in town seemed to fill him with wonder. The sight of water gushing out of a tap sent him into peals of laughter. His eyes popped out of his head in amazement when he saw an elephant one morning; it was the temple elephant bringing water for the deity's (Lord Thayumanaswamy) sacred bath. He was ceaselessly asking questions of us, what this was and what that and why; and I as tirelessly answered all his queries.

They admitted Kedari into the same school I was in,

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in my own class, in fact. We became inseparables. Where studies were concerned, I was, to be frank, only a mediocre student. I excelled in everything else. But Kedari was at the top of the class in his studies; in everything else he was rather second-rate. In all schools, mine included, there are, as everyone knows, the bullies who make fun of and torment boys like Kedari who are clever at their studies and at nothing else. In our school, too, there were some such but no one bullied Kedari. I saw to that.

About three years after Kedari's family came to Tiruchi, the grandfather passed away. By then the little money they had was also exhausted. Fortunately, Kedari had been awarded a scholarship and there was no school fee to pay. The rice that came from the little bit of land they had was enough for their needs. But what could they do for the rent and other expenses? Aunty and Grandmother began making *pappads* at home and sold them for a living.

It is inexplicable how sometimes one somehow gets attached to complete strangers. That was the case with me in regard to Kedari's family. Maybe, the moment of our first meeting was auspicious. I don't know. I grew to be even fonder of Aunt Bhagirathi than of my own mother. Her own neighbours were sometimes scornful of her, calling her 'a deserted wife'. But this kind of obloquy only increased my affection for her. I even acted as salesman for the *pappads* she made by telling all my friends at school about them and urging them to buy them from her.

Some time later, Grandmother also passed away. Aunt Bhagirathi and her son continued to live in the same house. Kedari proved himself worthy of all the sacrifices his mother made for his sake. He stood first in class year after year and finally passed his B.A. examination also with a first to his credit. In my joy at my friend's splendid success—I may mention—I did not feel much shame at my own failure that year !

Ever since Kedari went to college, parents with marriageable daughters had constantly pestered his mother with attractive offers. Anybody else would have heaved a

sigh of relief, 'Thank God, this *pappad* business is over!' and forced Kedari into a convenient marriage. But not Aunt Bhagirathi. She had learnt some painful lessons in the school of life. 'Till he finishes his B.A.', she continued to maintain stubbornly, 'there is to be no talk of marriage.'

So now that Kedari had completed his B.A. the question of his marriage finally came up for decision. Well, events happened this way. You must have heard of Manipuram Panniyar, the rich landlord, haven't you? He was then President of the Old Boys' Association of our college. He had been watching Kedari win first prize year after year. He also took a fancy to the boy, his looks, his manners and his temperament. So he decided to give his daughter in marriage to Kedari and soon made the offer. When Kedari was asked about it he promptly said that it was for his mother to decide. Aunt Bhagirathi was taken aback by the offer from such high quarter. But she did not lose her head. Any other woman would have demanded a handsome dowry of five or even ten thousand rupees. But not Aunt Bhagirathi. She said, 'We don't want any dowry. How you perform the marriage, what presents you give, are of no concern to me. But you must agree to send the boy to England and arrange for him to study for the I.C.S.'

I had suspected for some time that Aunty had such a plan for Kedari. One day, long before, she had also asked me about the I.C.S. examination and how one studied for it and where. Friends and neighbours were surprised, some even thought her callous. 'Look, what a hard-hearted creature she must be to prepare to send her only son away to far-off England!' they said.

Manipuram Panniyar Narasimha Iyer was an orthodox Brahmin. So at first he hesitated. Finally he consulted all the learned pundits and on being reassured that according to the *Sastras* there was a prescribed rite of expiation for travelling across seas, he agreed. However, I for one felt that he had consented only because he felt that he as a man should have at least as much strength of mind as a mere woman.

It was only after this that Aunty asked Kedari to go and see the girl and give his opinion about the offer. I had also gone with him on that visit. I realized then how justified was the faith Kedari had in his mother's opinions. The girl was indeed beautiful, exquisite as a picture. She appeared to be about 13 or 14.

But why dilate on that part of the story! Let me be brief. In due course the marriage was performed on a grand scale. A year later Kedari left for England. I went with him to Bombay and saw him off.

The Manipuram family repeatedly invited Aunt Bhagirathi to come and live with them in their house. But Aunty persistently but politely declined the invitation. A distant relative of hers had died recently leaving behind two young and helpless children. So Aunty brought the children from the village, kept them with her and took care of them. But she did one thing. To save her daughter-in-law's family embarrassment she discontinued making *pappads* for sale.

Seven or eight months after Kedari had sailed for England, his father-in-law sent for me one day. When I went to see him, Narasimha Iyer handed me a letter he had received and requested me to read it. It was signed 'Sundaram Iyer' and had come from Rangoon. Mr. Sundaram Iyer had come to know through someone who had come from Tiruchi that Manipuram Pannaiyar Narasimha Iyer's daughter had been given in marriage to his son, Kedari. He was, of course, very happy about it. Indeed, he now wanted to return home to be with his own kith and kin. Could Narasimha Iyer kindly send the passage money?

'Sankara, could this really be true?' asked Narasimha Iyer.

'This could be true, I feel,' I replied frankly. 'Any way, I'll ask Aunty,' I added and left with the letter.

I gave the letter to Bhagirathi Ammal. My fears that she might break down proved baseless. After all, she was the woman who had, with purpose and resolution, sent her only son to distant England across the seas. I should have known

that such a woman would not break down and turn sentimental in a crisis. Bhagirathi Ammal read the letter through and said calmly, 'Yes, this is his handwriting.' Then she fell silent and appeared to be in deep thought. She sighed once or twice but that was all, not a single tear did she shed. Then she got up abruptly as though she had finally made up her mind about something and going into the house, opened an old tin box and took out all the money that was in it. She brought it and gave it to me. There were eighty rupees.

'Sankara, this is all the money left of what I earned by selling *pappads*,' she said. 'Send it to him in my name. Give him also my address and ask him to come here direct.'

Her voice was a little thick, that was all. It was I who wept.

Even now I am unable to think calmly of what happened later. My hands tremble as I write of those incidents.

In ten days the money-order came back. A letter also came from the address to which the money had been sent informing us that Sundaram Iyer had died before the money could reach him. The neighbours had arranged for him a pauper's funeral.

Bhagirathi Ammal duly observed mourning for a husband she had not set eyes upon for eighteen years. On the tenth day according to the custom among Brahmins she was subjected to all the traditional humiliations that marked a woman's initiation into widowhood. They shaved her head, and did all they could to make her look dispossessed, unwanted, a human being written off.

Bhagirathi Ammal had said that Kedari should know nothing of all this. No need to write, she said, he could be told after he returned home.

Somehow the days passed. Like the mountain that laboured to bring forth a mouse, I worked hard and managed to get through my B.A. examination. I joined as a teacher in my old school. And the time for Kedari's return drew near.

As expected, he passed the I.C.S. with flying colours. To spare him the sudden shock of seeing his mother in her

bereft condition we had sent a letter to reach him when he landed at Bombay, informing him of his father's death and other matters. We learnt later he never saw that letter. He had hurried straight to the train from the ship and the letter remained undelivered.

He had sent a telegram about the time of his arrival and I was waiting for him on his doorstep. He hugged me in a fond embrace and dragging me along rushed inside. Whether he failed to see his mother sitting in a verandah or he failed to recognize her, I don't know, but he rushed past her calling, 'Mother ! ' and began eagerly looking for her in the house. I saw then for the first time tears in Bhagirathi Ammal's eyes.

'Look, Kedari ! ' I shouted unable to bear it any longer. 'What is wrong with you ? Your mother is here, you fellow. Can't you see ? '

Kedari turned, came slowly back and looked at his mother. There she sat dressed in widow's white weeds, the end of her sari thrown over her shaven head. He stared at her, transfixed.

'Oh, mother ! ' he cried in a frightened, strangled voice and collapsed on the floor, his head clasped in his hands.

A high fever now gripped Kedari. There was not a doctor in Tiruchi who was not consulted about his condition, there was not a single course of treatment which was not tried. But to no avail. Like his body which was burning with fever, his mind too was aflame with anger. A single thought, always the same lone idea, burned in his head. If I happened to be alone with him, he talked of nothing else.

'Sankara, what sort of a sacred tenet is this,' he would cry overcome with excitement, 'which says that for a husband who left her destitute and did not even turn to look her way once in the past 18 years, a woman must humiliate and disfigure herself ? Get me those sacred texts and let us burn them in the fire ! '

Or he would say : 'Look here, Sankara ! My mother is an intelligent person. She would not ever have by herself submitted to this degradation. It was all done for my sake.

Because I married into a rich family of orthodox nitwits, she agreed to have all those horrors heaped upon her head for fear of losing face with them.'

One day a couple of casual labourers passed by on the street talking to each other. Kedari heard them through the window. One of them said: 'Brother! Early this morning as I started out for work I saw that Brahmin widow with her inauspicious shaven head coming towards me. That explains why we haven't found any work today.'

'Sankara, did you hear that? Once it used to be said of my saintly mother that if she happened to look one's way one was washed clean of sin and evil. Today she is only a Brahmin widow with an inauspicious shaven head! A bad omen, isn't she?'

'Listen, Sankara! Now I don't care for my job. I don't care for anything. If ever I survive this illness and get well again, I shall dedicate myself to just one mission. I shall start a movement against this barbarous custom of disfiguring women when they are widowed. Our caste can do without this unique distinction.'

But perhaps Yama, the god of Death, didn't wish a superior kind of person like Kedari who now belonged to the honourable Indian Civil Service to stoop to such small matters. Kedari never got well. On the twenty-first day after his return from England, he left us for ever.

There is only one thing to add to this sad tale. Kedari's father-in-law had asked me for a photograph of his, if one was available. There was one we had taken together a long time before. I got this out, cut out his portrait from the print and had it enlarged and framed. I took it to the Manipuram House myself to give it to Narasimha Iyer. There I happened to see by chance Kedari's wife. I was shaken by her appearance. Pretty as a picture, I had described her, hadn't I? Well, the vandals had had a go at her too. She was a widow. So they had shorn her of her hair and shaven her head. They had done all they could to make that young girl look dispossessed, unwanted, a human being written off.